6 Developing soft skills with micro-fiction: a close-reading experience

Ana Reimão[1]

Abstract

Micro-contos, or micro-fiction, are very short and concise literary texts that require close-reading and inference from the reader. In this case study, I will describe how I have used these widely available texts in a Portuguese A2/B1 language module to develop analytical and other soft skills. I will demonstrate how this activity meets Tomlinson's (2011) universal principles for materials development in language teaching, namely, exposing learners to meaningful input highlighting linguistic features as well as enabling learners to engage affectively and cognitively in the learning experience. Finally, I will give details of how it has been received by students.

Keywords: soft skills, critical thinking, affectivity, transferable skills, learner-centred.

1. Introduction and context

According to the British Academy report (Born Global, 2016) *,* graduates with languages are highly valued by UK employers (pp. 4-5). Nevertheless, fostering the development of soft skills and other competencies alongside language proficiency has become a priority for foreign language teachers in recent years. This case study describes the activities used with a group of 14 students of Portuguese in Semester 1 of their second year. Students will have studied the language for one year only and achieved a Common European Framework of

---

1. University of Liverpool, Liverpool, United Kingdom; a.reimao@liverpool.ac.uk

Reference for languages (CEFR) A2 level. This module, with three weekly contact hours, relies heavily on independent study and aims to consolidate linguistic knowledge and take students onto B1 level by the end of the semester (12 weeks, 30 contact hours, and 120 hours of independent study).

2.   Theoretical framework

The issue that arose during module design was how to develop soft transferable skills while developing the target language using age and level appropriate materials in this fast-paced Portuguese language module. I initially started to work with *micro-contos* because they are very short literary texts that are self-contained. This means that, unlike when using a novel or short story, the full length of the text can be addressed and explored during the class, leaving ample time for discussion and other activities. These short texts are also widely available in many languages through online collections in blogs, webpages, and social media, such as *twitterature* or *instapoesia*, for instance.

In my experience, many language students are reluctant to read and study literary works, but research suggests that these materials aid the development of intercultural awareness, critical thinking and problem-solving alongside language proficiency (Almeida & Puig, 2017). Therefore, I wanted to encourage students to make the most of these authentic learning materials by modelling reading strategies and demonstrating that literature can be fulfilling, challenging, thought-provoking and – essentially – fun.

Further to this, I wanted to better support the transition from CEFR A2 to B1 level. Admittedly, in the first year of studies there is an emphasis on accuracy and accumulating a wide range of basic vocabulary and grammatical structures. However, this sometimes translates into a mindset where learners think that accuracy trumps content. As students prepare for a placement either working or studying in a Portuguese speaking country during their third year abroad, it is important to challenge this mindset by encouraging students to focus on communicating meaningful ideas.

In the first instance, I found guidance in materials development in Tomlinson's (2011) basic principles. This author takes into account research on L2 acquisition and proposes a set of useful parameters: learners must be exposed to rich and meaningful input; learners must be engaged cognitively and benefit from using the same mental resources they typically use in L1; learners benefit from noticing salient features and discovering how they are used; learners need opportunities to use language to achieve communicative purposes (Tomlinson, 2011, p. 7). These guidelines sum up a well-rounded learner-centred approach to language teaching, with a focus on both input and output. In addition, Tomlinson stresses the importance of positive affect and suggests a few strategies to enable it which I will later discuss.

With these considerations in mind, I created the set of language learning activities described below. They are meant to support learners to bridge the gap between CEFR levels A2 to B1, but may be useful in other levels.

3.   Activity description

I conducted this activity over two one-hour lessons. The aim was to develop analytical skills that would enable learners to write a critical review in Portuguese, as part of the assessment; see full instructions in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Instructions[2]

1st Coursework Assignment

Please write a critical review in Portuguese (min. 300 words) on one or two micro-contos of your choice. The micro-conto(s) must be originally written in Portuguese and transcribed in your assignment (indicating the source) but excluded from the overall word count. Please note that you should follow these reading guidelines:

    a. De que trata o micro-conto? Faça uma análise expondo as suas três camadas: tema, acontecimentos que levaram ao momento descrito no conto, descrição e análise dos personagens.
    b. Imagine um final ou final alternativo para o(s) micro-conto(s).
    c. Explique porque escolheu o/cada micro-conto e a sua relevância para a cultura contemporânea.
    d. No caso de ter escolhido dois contos, pode refletir sobre as suas diferenças e semelhanças.

2. Translation from the Portuguese: a) What is the *micro-conto* about? Analyse the text, identifying its three layers: theme, events that precede those described, and characters. b) Imagine an alternative ending to the *micro-conto*(s). c) Explain why you chose the *micro-conto*(s) and its/their relevance to contemporary culture. d) If you opted for two texts, you an discuss their similarities and differences.
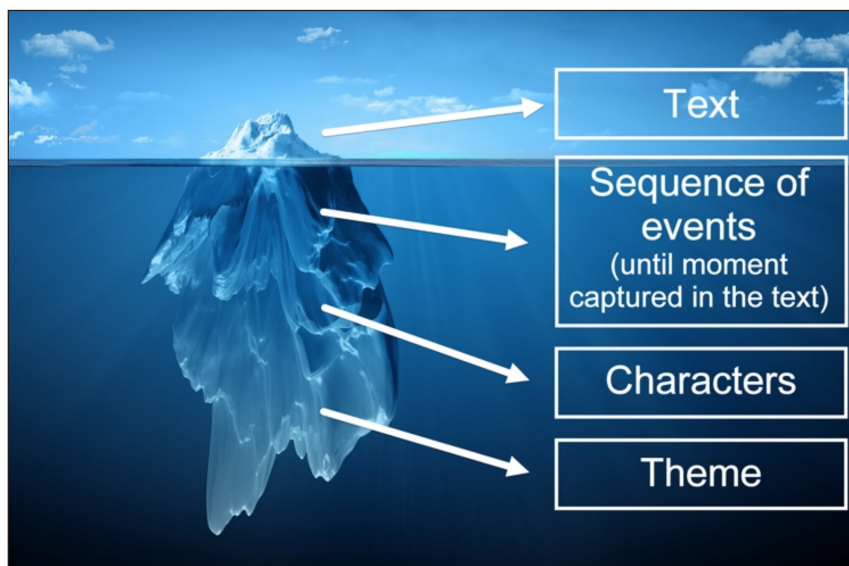
A key feature of *micro-contos* is that they hint at a lot of information which is left out of the text. This means that the reader has to construct meaning from very few elements and it is crucial to consider every detail to decode the message.

Micro-contos are also usually ambiguous and the reader must make decisions based on subtle linguistic elements to infer meaning or justify an interpretation. I introduced a selected *micro-conto* to the class who explored relevant linguistic elements, or "salient features" (Tomlinson, 2011, p. 7), through close-reading. Take the example below:

> "Aqueles dois olhos luminosos, destacados na noite, avançavam em sua direção. Quando o alcançaram, uma buzina foi a última coisa que ouviu" (Seabra, n.d.).

In this *micro-conto*, 'dois olhos luminosos' could refer to the bright eyes of a person or animal, but the association with the word 'buzina' (horn) in the second sentence suggests a metaphor for the headlights of a car/truck/van. We know however that the vehicle is not a motorbike because there are two headlights. Similarly, from the first sentence we can infer that one thing is heading in the direction of something else, but we do not yet know the gender of these objects/ beings. However, the use of the masculine singular pronoun 'o' in the second sentence – 'Quando o alcançaram' – indicates that it is a male/masculine person/ animal/object. These cryptic lines encapsulate a story that the learners must try to articulate. The *conto* is meant to spur learners' creativity and imagination within the constraints of the text and learners have to explain what, in their opinion, the text is describing. There are many possibilities but these are not limitless.

I then introduced the iceberg theory (Collie & Slater, 1987), a writing method used to suggest underlying themes without explicitly mentioning them, according to which the text of the *micro-conto* is the visible tip of the iceberg and below the surface are the other elements, i.e. the sequence of events until the moment captured by the text; the characters and their story; and the theme or wider context (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. The iceberg theory[3]

After students collectively identified how these layers related to the initial text, the class was split into small groups and each chose one *micro-conto* from a sample of five, on which they repeated the iceberg analysis and close-reading, before sharing their thoughts with the whole class. Admittedly, a mixture of L1 and L2 was used throughout, with more confident students attempting answers in L2. I gave positive reinforcement to these attempts but I also recognise that this is a challenging activity and that if learners attempted an explanation of the text in L1 they were still engaging positively with the input in the target language. I gave feedback to groups, while guiding their reading strategies before thoughts were shared by the groups. Some groups picked the same text which led to a fruitful discussion and students pointed out what was challenging in their text by clarifying new idioms, vocabulary, and difficult grammar points for the benefit of the whole class.

---

3. Illustration adapted from César Henrique de Santis Nascimento's image (Public domain); https://www.flickr.com/photos/146896964@N02/28928783864

In the following class, learners used the iceberg structure to write a *micro-conto* in groups. I offered images as prompts, but not everyone took them. Each group had to identify the distinct iceberg layers which they shared with the tutor, but they shared only the finished *micro-conto* with the class.

4.   Discussion

The ambiguous nature of *micro-contos* allows for several possible interpretations, which challenged learners and enabled them to practise problem-solving. Furthermore, by writing a *micro-conto,* learners could exercise their creativity and further develop an understanding and appreciation for the genre.

This approach to skills development through creativity goes hand in hand with positive affect. On the latter, Tomlinson (2011, p. 7) suggests that learners who achieve positive affect are more motivated and are much more likely to achieve communicative competence. Occasionally, I observed that a student did not respond enthusiastically to the text read in class. To counter this, I allowed for freedom of text choice, i.e. a choice of five texts for the in-class group activity, and a list of online sources to choose from for the assessed piece). This not only allowed for further exposure to the target language but also required self-investment and facilitated a learner-centred discovery which, once more, is suggested by Tomlinson as good practice (Tomlinson, 2011, p. 12), and led to lowering affective barriers. Furthermore, the range of activities – reading, analysing, writing, discussing – cater for different learning styles while encouraging intellectual and emotional involvement which can lead to a deeper and more durable learning (Tomlinson, 2011, pp. 18, 21-22).

Finally, Tomlinson (2011) proposes that feedback should have a focus on communicative effectiveness rather than on accuracy. In this case study, the individually-written assessed coursework was the culmination of the activity with formative feedback being an essential element. The tutor not only highlighted linguistic features that needed attention or that were well used, but also focused on the analysis and communicative effectiveness of the text so that

learners could gauge which linguistic structures were most effective. Federici (2017) echoes Tomlinson (2011) in stressing the importance of valuing effective communication and offers a successful model for developing writing skills by presenting learners with a clear purpose and offering formative feedback along the planning stages with a focus on communication rather than sentence-level accuracy.

Overall, the individual pieces of coursework not only were a meaningful analysis but signalled a clear departure from the CEFR A2 communication "in areas of immediate need" in the direction of producing B1 "connected text on topics which are […] of personal interest" (CEFR, n.d., p. 24). And, even though there was no formal mechanism for capturing feedback on this activity specifically, the returns in the general module questionnaires that were distributed at the end of the semester were very revealing. Nearly seven weeks after the activity was conducted in class, it was still mentioned by several students as their favourite part of the module which confirms the impact of this learning activity on fostering positive affect. Other points praised by learners were the exposure to authentic materials, the enjoyable analysis methodology, and the usefulness of the approach. Another positive result of this activity was that students really enjoyed reading literary texts and, although this goes beyond the remit of this paper, it would be interesting to enquire how far the use of *micro-contos* has contributed to changing learners' attitudes towards these types of texts.

5.   Conclusion

In this paper I have demonstrated that adopting Tomlinson's (2011) principles to develop materials using *micro-contos* has enhanced the learning experience and helped learners progress from CEFR A2 to B1 in Portuguese. By presenting them with clear and stimulating communicative purposes, allied to engaging input and opportunities for formative feedback, I have facilitated the development of learners' language skills as well as transferable soft skills, such as analytical, creative, and problem-solving skills.

References

Almeida, A. B., & Puig, I. (2017). Enhancing employability skills by bringing literature back in the foreign language class. In C. Álvarez-Mayo, A. Gallagher-Brett & F. Michel (Eds), *Innovative language teaching and learning at university: enhancing employability* (pp. 105-112). Research-publishing.net. https://doi.org/10.14705/rpnet.2017.innoconf2016.660

Born Global. (2016). *Born global: implications for higher education*. The British Academy. https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/publications/born-global-implications-higher-education/

CEFR. (n.d.). *Common European framework of reference for languages: learning, teaching, assessment.* European year of languages 2001. https://rm.coe.int/1680459f97

Collie, J., & Slater, S. (1987). *Literature in the language classroom*. Cambridge University Press.

Federici, T. (2017). Enhancing students' potential: EBL projects in language teaching. In C. Álvarez-Mayo, A. Gallagher-Brett & F. Michel (Eds), *Innovative language teaching and learning at university: enhancing employability* (pp. 89-95). Research-publishing.net. https://doi.org/10.14705/rpnet.2017.innoconf2016.658

Seabra, C. (n.d.). *Microcontos*. http://www.seabra.com/contos/index1.html

Tomlinson, B. (2011). Introduction: principles and procedures of materials development. In B. Tomlinson (Ed.), *Materials development in language teaching* (pp. 1-31). Cambridge University Press.

Research-publishing.net

Literature in language learning: new approaches
Edited by Ana Bela Almeida, Ulrike Bavendiek, and Rosalba Biasini

Publication date: 2020/09/14

Disclaimer: Research-publishing.net does not take any responsibility for the content of the pages written by the authors of this book. The authors have recognised that the work described was not published before, or that it was not under consideration for publication elsewhere. While the information in this book is believed to be true and accurate on the date of its going to press, neither the editorial team nor the publisher can accept any legal responsibility for any errors or omissions. The publisher makes no warranty, expressed or implied, with respect to the material contained herein. While Research-publishing.net is committed to publishing works of integrity, the words are the authors' alone.

Trademark notice: product or corporate names may be trademarks or registered trademarks, and are used only for identification and explanation without intent to infringe.

Copyrighted material: every effort has been made by the editorial team to trace copyright holders and to obtain their permission for the use of copyrighted material in this book. In the event of errors or omissions, please notify the publisher of any corrections that will need to be incorporated in future editions of this book.